



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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FALSEHOOD

Christianity is a supremely realistic religion. God is forthright about our nature -- we are created in His image so we are good, yet at the same time we are utterly sinful and unable to abide His presence. His realism leads to the Cross, which is both His judgment and His love for us as His fallen children. Our calling is to be as honest and realistic about ourselves as He is. So we need to be wholly truthful -- in the way we think and live as well as in the way we talk.

While we rarely intend to speak lies, we may nevertheless fall short of the ideal of complete truthfulness. There are many ways in which we are tempted to fudge. For instance, we may not wish to face the truth about our failings, and thus be less than candid about what we do and why we do it. We agree that we ought to be in church ten minutes before the service in order to recollect ourselves, examine our consciences, and prepare to worship. But what do we do when we come in during the first hymn? First, we belittle our lateness -- "I made it almost on time; I didn't really miss any of the service." We conveniently forget about our desire to be there before the hour and not just in the nick of time. Then we make excuses for why we are later than we would wish: "I missed the lights; traffic was bad; I couldn't get the usual parking place close by and had to walk farther; I had to drop off something for coffee hour first." The reality is that we left home too late because we tried to do more than time would allow. Or we just didn't get up early enough to make it on time.

We are tempted to make excuses for ourselves every time we do something wrong, or something that doesn't measure up to our standards for ourselves. While it might not be "lying" it is certainly less than the whole truth. As Christians we aspire to honesty and truthfulness, and this must begin with our knowledge of ourselves.

There are other ways in which we are tempted to be less than truthful. Things go wrong: are we willing to shoulder our share of the responsibility? Or do we seek to minimize our part, and cast the greater blame on others? We may lie silently to ourselves about our responsibility, as well as out loud to others.

Or we may be tempted to tailor our words to what we think others want to hear. We want others to accept us and think well of us, so it is a natural temptation to say what we think will please them whether it is actually true or not. Those of a certain temperament are more susceptible to this temptation (particularly those who are "people-oriented" and are a bit insecure about themselves), but it afflicts all to some degree. The temptation has a built-in brake, in that we must not be so untruthful with one person that it can be discovered by comparison with what we have told someone else. For then we would be found out, discredited and humiliated. Humiliation is what we were trying to avoid by lying in the first place!

Similarly, some people are tempted to exaggerate things for the sake of impressing others. It may be such a habit that we do it unconsciously. We establish our own exceptional worth by being able to report the exceptional.

These temptations are subtle compared to malicious lying and gossip -- which can also afflict Christians at times, and should not be ignored! But outright lying and gossip are easier to recognize, and we are likely to feel guilty about them. For many of us the subtle ones are the more dangerous because of their subtlety. However we are tempted to speak something other than the truth, we need vigilance. We need to step back from time to time and examine what we have been saying. Have we exaggerated, or fudged for the sake of pleasing (or manipulating) others, or denied our responsibility or the fact of our sin? Only by such self-examination, done by the light of grace, can we see our bad habits, and thus have a chance to break them.

Lying speech is not the only problem, however, or even the most serious one for the Christian. There is also the temptation to lie by the way we live. This is most often a form of hypocrisy: we profess one thing and live another. We profess to be Christian, and live as a pagan. We profess to value humility and charity, and yet live in pride and selfishness. We go to church on Sunday, and yet indulge our desires all week. We claim Jesus as Lord but will not let Him control our lives.

At root is usually pride. We do enough of the externals of virtue to think that we are virtuous. We go to church; we put a couple of dollars in the envelope every week; we avoid illegal drugs and adultery and divorce. So we think it is then all right to indulge ourselves in looking down on those less virtuous, or complaining when the parish is not run according to our standards, or having a little impatience and anger from time to time. God can't expect us to be perfect, can He? That would not be reasonable.

We cannot have it both ways. If we will be Christians, we must be wholly (and honestly) Christian. This means the whole package: the Cross, dying in order to live, growing into the full stature of Christ, accepting that we do not deserve to be saved and cannot save ourselves, and that we are saved anyway by God's free gift. This is part of being honest about who we are. We must accept God's judgment upon our sinfulness and its just condemnation: we do not deserve His love and the reward of heaven. Being truthful means giving up the claim to our own righteousness, and then striving to conform our lives to the truth of our sinfulness and His mercy. The truth is not only that we are sinners, but also that He redeems us.

This truth is the basis for our joy and peace in this life and in the next. In our Christian growth we learn to conform (or, more accurately, we allow God to conform) our lives to His standard for us, which we have in Jesus. Many parts of our unruly selves will need work. If we will be truthful and not live a lie, we must examine our life as well as our words, to see whether we have accepted the standards we have professed.

In particular, we need to focus upon grace. Grace alone can let us see truly, let us be realistic about ourselves. Without it, we will end up in despair when we contemplate our sins and our inability to be virtuous -- to be good enough to get into heaven. Because grace gives us the assurance of God's mercy -- that He wills for us to be reconciled to Him and thus to have a place in heaven -- it gives us the courage to be realistic about ourselves. Our sin is no longer a threat to our self-esteem. We need not insist upon control of our lives, for God will do a better job anyway. We need not assert our virtue, either for ourselves or over against others, since we have the immeasurably greater virtue of Christ's righteousness given to us as a gift.

Similarly, we learn that our life is hid with Christ in God. It is to be found there, not in what we make of it for ourselves. We need to be reminded of this every time we try to put up a facade for others and pretend we are someone other than who we really are. We need not worry about what others think: it really doesn't matter. Our profession is to please God and Him alone, whatever the cost. When we live as though everything (or at least, a lot) depended upon what others think, we live a lie.

There is a third way in which we are tempted to lie: in our imagination. This seems innocuous, but can still become a dangerous habit. Here we confuse our imagination with reality. For example, we may think we know why someone does something. We attribute to him a certain motivation. A stranger comes into church one Sunday, and does rather more outward acts of devotion than is our wont. If we are a little unsure of his looks, we think he is just being "holier than thou." If we think he looks like "one of us" -- someone we would like in the parish, then we admire his devotional zeal. The reality may simply be that he comes from a parish of another tradition where such things are the norm. By imagining that we know what his motivation is, we deceive ourselves, and go beyond the truth. We may put so much trust in our "insight" that we cut off any possibility of a relationship by prejudging him -- and lose (potentially, at least) a gift God had intended for us.

Or take a more secular example. Politicians, we imagine, never do anything other than for the purpose of getting reelected and amassing power. While this may be true some or even most of the time, we cannot know that in every case such is the motivation. Our imaginings lead us to cynicism rather than realism about their temptations and humanity.

Such imaginings often accompany habitual untruthfulness about our lives. The motivations we attribute to others serve to make them look bad and make us look good by comparison: their failings make us look virtuous. The lie is that we simply do not know their motivations, yet we pretend that we do. This is not real but imaginary. Since the Christian faith is based on Reality, such imaginations are an obstacle to Christian growth.

Imaginations may be a problem in other ways as well. They may remake the world from what it is to what we think it is -- and when the habit is deeply rooted we forget that the two are different. We may, for example, get into the habit of thinking that the world is basically against us. We persistently think that the deck is stacked against us. Then we act as though this were true: with self-pity, depression, anger, demands upon others that they feel sorry for us and take care of us.

This temptation is apt to afflict those of a pessimistic temperament. The imagination can work the opposite way for those whose more positive temperament gives them a more immediate experience of God's working in their lives: all the goods which come to me from the world show that I am really quite good and worthy of reward. Our imagination feeds our vanity. We sometimes cast this in more Christian terms: the Spirit rules our lives. Since this is the case, then anything which I feel in my heart that I really need, then the Spirit wants me to have it. We lose the ability to distinguish between what I want and what God wants for me.

So there are many ways in which temptations to untruth confront us. To resist, we need to cultivate a distrust of self, which is the flip side of trusting God. Most temptations take root in our pride, one way or another. We are ready to recast the world to make ourselves look good -- this is the way the self is. If we can learn how deceitful the "old man" is, how ready to look out for itself and thus oppose the work of Christ within us, we will be prepared for the temptations.

The most effective antidote is to be centered on God, through the habits of prayer, Bible reading, worship, recollection, thankfulness, penitence. Easier said than done, perhaps! The point of Christian life is to give up that illusory divinity (which Satan promised to Eve, and to which we all pretend), and recognize God as the center of our lives. This is the truth about the world and about ourselves. The more we are willing to be centered on Him, giving up being centered on ourselves, the more we are able to be truthful about ourselves and the world.

So whenever we perceive that we are living, or speaking, or imagining a lie, we should flee to Him. We should ask Him to replace the lie with the truth, giving us the courage to see the truth, and then to live it out. Our side of God-centeredness is an attitude of thankfulness and penitence. Penitence recognizes the truth about ourselves; thankfulness celebrates the truth about God's dealings with us.

[I am indebted for much of this to Dorotheus of Gaza, a sixth century monk. If you are interested, try to find a copy of Dorotheus of Gaza: Discourses and Sayings, tr. Eric P. Wheeler, Cistercian Publications, 1977.]